

Byrd-Bennett's Detroit tenure being reviewed; Consultant's firms got more than \$1 million

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Body

Former Chicago Public Schools CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett is under scrutiny in Detroit, officials said, where firms at the heart of a federal corruption probe won business during her tenure as a top accountability official.

A Detroit Public Schools spokeswoman said the district continues to "work closely" with law enforcement on issues related to Byrd-Bennett's time with the district but offered no further details.

Records show firms connected to Gary Solomon, the education consultant indicted along with Byrd-Bennett, were paid more than \$1 million by Detroit schools during and after Byrd-Bennett's employment with the district.

Those companies have also done business with CPS and were at the center of the corruption scandal that now have Byrd-Bennett facing up to 7 1/2 years in prison. One of the companies, Solomon's attorneys acknowledged this week, was a search firm that assisted Mayor Rahm Emanuel's administration on school issues.

Solomon pleaded not guilty Wednesday to charges he promised Byrd-Bennett hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes for steering lucrative no-bid contracts his way. A day earlier, Byrd-Bennett admitted wrongdoing in the same federal courtroom and agreed to testify against Solomon if necessary.

Also pleading not guilty Wednesday were Solomon's partner, Thomas Vranas, as well as the two companies they ran, SUPES Academy and Synesi Associates.

Detroit records show Synesi won business from the school district after Byrd-Bennett came to work as a consultant. So did Proact Search, Solomon's executive recruiting firm, which has also done business with CPS.

A spokeswoman for the Detroit school system said the district investigates any matter involving "allegations of misconduct" and cooperates with relevant law enforcement agencies.

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"In the case of Ms. Byrd-Bennett," spokeswoman Michelle Zdrodowski said in a statement, "we are continuing to work closely with law enforcement officials."

In May 2009, Byrd-Bennett agreed to an \$18,500-a-month consulting contract to serve as chief academic and accountability officer for Detroit schools under emergency financial manager Robert Bobb.

Byrd-Bennett left the Detroit school district in June 2011, according to a resume she submitted to CPS.

Synesi was paid roughly \$630,000 by the Detroit district in the six months leading up to March 2011, according to expense reports for that period filed by Bobb's office. The firm had received a contract from Detroit to serve as an "educational partner provider" with the district in 2010.

Another report issued in November 2011 showed Synesi was paid an additional \$858,000. Those records say a Synesi invoice for about \$128,700 was listed as "disapproved" by the district.

Between November 2011 and February 2012, spending records show Detroit also approved about \$215,000 in payments to Synesi.

Those records show Proact Search, a Solomon-operated executive recruiting firm, also won business in Detroit -- getting roughly \$41,000, according to the November 2011 expense report.

Byrd-Bennett also has come under scrutiny in Detroit after another of her former employers, publisher Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, won a 16-month, \$40 million contract from the district for a "managed instruction program" just months after her arrival.

Byrd-Bennett, according to her CPS resume, worked for Harcourt School Publishers as a "superintendent-in-residency" between February 2006 and May 2009.

Byrd-Bennett's resume states that beginning in September 2011, just months after she left her Detroit post, she worked for Synesi as "senior advisor for the design and implementation of school turnaround."

Her resume states she also took on part-time work with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt during the period between her departure from Detroit and arrival at CPS, again as a "superintendent-in-residence."

An indictment returned last week accused Solomon and Vranas of arranging to pay Byrd-Bennett as much as \$2.3 million in kickbacks and other perks in exchange for her using her influence to award more than \$23 million in no-bid contracts to the SUPES Academy, where she previously worked as a consultant.

Vranas and Solomon and the two corporations face multiple counts of wire and mail fraud. Solomon and Vranas also face charges of bribery of a government official and conspiracy to defraud the U.S.

Proact's relationship with the CPS precedes Byrd-Bennett's arrival. The firm has received hundreds of thousands of dollars in payments from CPS since the 2010 budget year. In May

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2010, an effort to authorize a no-bid contract worth up to \$250,000 with Proact to recruit principal candidates was withdrawn from the Chicago Board of Education's agenda.

That firm was not charged as part of the sweeping indictment authorities announced last week, though federal subpoenas dated mid-April asked CPS to turn over all records related to SUPES Academy, Synesi and Proact.

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Notes

Chicagoland

Graphic

Photo: (Barbara) Byrd-Bennett

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